

We Called It FARMER'S GARAGE

"John, I've got this great idea."

"You know," he said, straining against the limits of time and space that always seemed to constrain his flights of fancy and inhibit his realization of miracles, "You know, we could make money from the depressed mobile home industry in northern Indiana."

"How's that?" I asked.

"See, there are all these factories that made mobile homes. But with the depression and the oil crisis, no one is buying mobile homes, so there is tremendous unused capacity."

"Yeah?" I said, slow to grasp the notion.

"Well, in the Middle East they desperately need housing. I have a friend who can prepare the sites and arrange local transportation. All we have to do is manufacture the mobile homes and air freight them over. Because they need houses so bad they'll pay the extra cost of the air freight."

"Ok," I said, "but there must be a reason someone else hasn't been doing this already."

"Ah," he exclaimed, extracting yet another cigarette from the pack and inserting it into that incongruous cigarette holder reminiscent of Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Ah, but you don't get it. What are ready made houses but empty boxes filled with air? "

"So?" I responded, still slow to grasp the central notion of this proposition.

"So, we fill each mobile home we send with toilet paper and light bulbs. Both commodities in short supply in the Middle East. Since they weigh practically nothing and the air freight is already paid, we can get the light bulbs and toilet paper over there almost for free. Think of the deal. And, John, you can take a leave from IU to run this operation."

As Dick continued to spin out the details of this scheme, one of the first that introduced me to Indiana University's resident genius eccentric, I wondered, "What the hell am I hearing?"

This guy has collected a bunch of unconnected items (economic depression in northern Indiana, his own knowledge of the Middle East, an understanding of my own frustration with certain aspects of academic life) and in a fifteen minute lunch has invented an ingenious, risky, crazy, and just possibly plausible scheme. Was he serious? How should I respond? What did the guy expect from me?

So we talked about the mobile home industry, I heard about the conditions of life, transportation, and housing in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East, we commiserated about the problem of reward and recognition in academia, and Dick showed me how to begin inventing realities that do not yet exist.

We never did invent the housing airlift or sell light bulbs and toilet paper in the Middle East, but in continuing the conversation I found a soul mate, a mentor, an inspiration, and a friend whose value can never be measured. From then on, Dick Farmer became a permanent part of my life.

Unlike most academics, Dick Farmer is mostly invisible in his official curriculum vitae. The tens upon tens of books, zillions of articles and presentations, and multitudes of students, faculty committees, honors, awards and recognitions, only profile the published and public output of an incredible spirit. This academic record shows a scholar of tremendous breadth and imagination, of prodigious writing ability, and of catholic interests. It demonstrates an intellectual vigor and passion for understanding that exhausts normal academic expectations.

Yet a full reading of this material gives only a small portion of the man whose energy, imagination, vision, and generosity sustained so many of us over the years.

While we didn't airlift the light bulbs, we did invent another one of Dick's visions that we insisted on calling **FARMER'S GARAGE**.

Few enterprises so neatly represented the complexity of Dick's mind and spirit as this improbable garage.

"Imagine," he would say to me and anyone else who would listen, "a garage where you can have your car fixed by two Ph.D.s, an MPA, a Dean, and a Department Chairman."

FARMER'S GARAGE, like its namesake, drew its inspiration from the practical and pragmatic. Dick liked real things, but in unusual combinations. Dick liked to solve real problems, although he preferred to solve them without reference to the established norms.

The **GARAGE** responded to one of Dick's favorite enthusiasms, the repair of decrepit motor vehicles. Indeed, it was this shared enthusiasm for the greasy grungy business of auto repair that brought us together. But Dick saw auto repair in a different light.

Most of us think of cars as machines that have a normal state of existence, a condition that could be described as fixed. For us, fixed means that the vehicle works and looks pretty much as the manufacturer intended. Brought up as I was with formal technical training in auto repair, no other view had ever occurred to me. Consequently it took quite a while to understand the logic of Dick's approach to automobiles, which, because it exemplified the genius that was Farmer's, can best be described through an examination of what I call **Farmer's Fundamentals**.

Fundamental 1

GET IT DONE

"What should I do with it?"

We were looking at the crumpled fender on a nondescript vehicle and I wondered how I was going to fix it.

"Do you want a 10-foot job or a 20-foot job?" Dick asked after looking over the damage.

"What's that mean?" I said.

With the patience he used to explain a patently obvious constant of the universe to a not-too-bright pupil, Dick explained.

"If you fix that up so it looks good to someone standing 20 feet away, that's a 20-foot job. It will take about 5 hours and cost about 30 dollars in body putty and materials. But if you fix it up so it looks good to someone standing 10 feet away, that's a 10-foot job and it will take 20 hours and cost about 100 dollars for material."

"Ok," I said, *"but what if I want it perfect?"*

"What for?" Dick asked? *"You going to put this in a show? Or do you just want to drive it around and not be embarrassed? Why waste time and energy on making something better than it needs to be?"*

That little lesson in the theory of limits and the calculus of marginal cost vs. marginal benefits would have taken a lesser scholar 15 weeks and much mathematics to impart imperfectly. Dick Farmer got it across in 15 minutes while telling me how to fix the car.

Fundamental 2

IDENTIFY THE MAIN EVENT

"Dick," I said one noon over lunch in the Main Library cafeteria, *"I have to explain underdevelopment to my class. Where can I find the best data to illustrate the nature of underdevelopment? World Bank? UNESCO? Statistical Abstract of Latin America?"*

"Best thing to do is look at the junk."

"What?" I said.

"Look at the junk, you know, the junk yards, old lumber, pipe, bathtubs, broken windows, things like that."

"What's that got to do with underdevelopment?" I asked.

As the ash on the ubiquitous cigarette grew longer and longer, defying gravity as it zipped through the air to emphasize a point here and a declamation there, Dick launched into one of his incredible monologues, flashes of brilliant analysis and insight interspersed between a thinly connected and endlessly fascinating series of stories and anecdotes.

It turned out, of course, that Dick wrote the book on junk. A marvelous piece that illustrates the connection between waste and want, between what we throw away and what we keep. I, like Dick, have always loved authentic junk yards, filled with the broken treasures of the past, each carrying its history and its fatal wound, each with its promise of a small repair that would make it whole again. But where I, the romantic, imagined little stories, Dick saw social and economic structure, fundamental relationships of man, society, and economy.

With his unbelievable ability to convert the trivial detail into the fundamental relationship, Dick forever transformed junk. No longer could I travel through Latin America and see the neat piles of used lumber, the carefully hoarded sheets of tin and stockpiled caches of cinder block as the quaint picturesque leavings of an underdeveloped society; now they reminded me of the critical significance of resources, scarcity, and need. Dick always brought us back to the main event.

Fundamental 3

MAKE IT WORK BY BREAKING THE RULES

Sometimes I think Dick invented **FARMER'S GARAGE** to prove that his cheerfully chaotic approach to the universe was actually practical.

Dick had this great idea.

Everyone complained about auto repairs. Nobody trusted their auto mechanic. Prices were too high, the cars never worked after they were fixed, and the customers felt cheated.

Dick puzzled over that. How come? Cars were easy. Complicated to be sure, cranky at times, but fundamentally fixable. Why couldn't we invent a car repair business that solved all these problems?

So Dick began by breaking the rules:

If conventional wisdom said that car repairs cost too much, Dick said, let's charge more than the rest.

If conventional wisdom said that people only fixed cars when they went bad, Dick said, let's fix them before they break.

If conventional wisdom said bring the cars to the mechanic, Dick said, let's pick up the cars and return them.

If conventional wisdom said make a solid estimate and have the customer sign it, Dick said, have them trust us.

So that's what **FARMER'S GARAGE** did. We charged 10% more than the market, we fixed them on schedule before they broke, we picked up the cars and returned them home when done, and we said "Trust us, we're great."

Once a customer complained. The car hadn't worked right and we discovered the engine was bad. So we had it overhauled, returned the car, and presented the bill which the customer paid. But the customer called and complained, *"We didn't ask for an engine overhaul."*

I asked Dick, *"What should we do?"*

Dick said *"Send them a check for the price of the overhaul, and tell them to take the car somewhere else from now on. If you don't trust us, we won't fix your car."*

Dick was right. They returned our check, brought the car back for more service later on, and never again complained about a bill.

Fundamental 4

FORGET APPEARANCES, THEY DON'T AFFECT THE FUNDAMENTALS

While we picked up and delivered customer's cars at their homes as an elite service, and charged for it, the pickup and delivery actually worked to prevent the customers from ever seeing the **GARAGE**.

"Wait until you see it," Dick said. *"I've got this great property over on the west side, two lots, a basement, a place for Jean's organic garden, it's great."*

"A basement?" I said.

"Yeah, it couldn't be better. See, the people lived in it, so there is water, heat, plumbing."

"What about the roof?"

"Oh, well, that's just tarpaper, but I've got this hippie kid and his wife who are going to build a house on the basement using nothing but material from junk yards, you know, old lumber, old windows, things like that."

I should have known. But what the hell, Dick could make us all see gold in the hills. **FARMER'S GARAGE** was born in a stone basement with a low ceiling. Distinguished by poor lighting, inadequate ventilation, a leaky tarpaper covering that served as a roof until the hippie got the house up, and a drainage system that channeled a city block's worth of water through the basement to the creek, the **GARAGE** was our home for two glorious summers and a cold winter.

We started out with Paul Marer's Mustang, a classic of the mid-sixties, a convertible with bad paint, a torn roof, a crummy engine, and miscellaneous other defects. Paul said ok, we could have it, mesmerized as were we all by the magic of **FARMER'S GARAGE**. Paul had even seen the place.

We raided Paul Hedrick's Sunoco Station at Third and Jordan, going out of business at the time, and brought tools and other impedimenta of the mechanic's trade to **FARMER'S GARAGE**. And there, lying in a pool of water under Marer's Mustang, **FARMER'S GARAGE** came into existence. The Mustang, not a big car by any means, was rolled in catty-corner to fit in the cramped space.

"Dick," I said, *"we need a hoist to get the engine out."* I had visions of a shiny mechanical/hydraulic hoist. Not Dick.

"Look at those floor joists," he said pointing six inches over our heads. *"Those are native hardwood, at least 2 by 6, ought to hold an engine."*

"How do we do that?" I said, knowing it impossible to pull an engine without an expensive hoist and still secure in the fullness of my mechanical expertise.

"Ok, first we drill a hole in each joist and then we put a piece of pipe between the joists supported in the holes. From that we put a cheap ratchet winch, and there you are."

Twenty minutes later Dick had the holes drilled with an ancient hand auger and a dull bit (how he managed to make the mangy collection of beat up tools he owned do so much remains a mystery to this day). He found a pipe the right size and stuffed it in the holes, chinned himself on the pipe and said, *"There, let's do it."*

I knew it couldn't be done, wasn't safe to do, and shouldn't be done.

So we did it. We pulled the engine out of that Mustang, delivered it to Full-o-Pep our parts jobber, picked up a remanufactured engine and put it back in, buttoned it up, and the Mustang ran like a charm. We had it painted and fixed up until it was perfect, all but the convertible top. Dick had never done one quite like that, and it never completely closed, but **FARMER'S GARAGE** was in business.

Over the next two years or so, we fixed a continuing and growing stream of cars. The exotic house over the basement got built by the hippies including a magnificent attached glass greenhouse scavenged from some salvage yard. With the drainage fixed, the water finally stopped flowing into the basement. We acquired a host of more or less professional tools. And Dick's father, George, took over part of the basement for a home grown machine shop.

But never, in the course of those years, did **FARMER'S GARAGE** look, operate, or feel like any garage anywhere. It was an *Alice in Wonderland* place, a fantasy land of mechanical exotica.

It took me a long time to understand the underlying logic of **FARMER'S GARAGE**. At first I struggled to make the place conform to some ideal notion of a garage, stored in my subconscious from auto shop days at Los Angeles High School. I wanted it neat, the tools all lined up, the replacement parts in neat rows, the work sheets clipped together in their individual clipboards, the floor swept, and the discarded parts removed.

Dick hated neat. Jimmy Hedrick, his dad Paul Hedrick, and I thought Dick was crazy. We'd work to fix it up, neaten it up, arrange it, remove the trash, discard the broken parts, and in general make it RIGHT. Three days later, Dick would have moved in some hulk of a car, dismantled two thirds of it for a right rear shock absorber brace, and left the remnants scattered all over the place. The tools were here, there, and everywhere, the reference manuals tumbled in a heap, and the salvaged part triumphantly installed on some worthless piece of marginally running junk Dick insisted on restoring.

After all, it was his garage.

We fought it for a while, but in the end Dick's creativity won, and we learned to live with the chaos, indeed we learned what it meant.

Dick loved knowledge, he had a voracious appetite for information, and he had a brilliant academic mind, but Dick distrusted orderliness. In his incessant search to find what could be, Dick always feared he'd miss something significant if restricted by artificial neatness. He wanted the material of creation around him. If he thought about a car problem, he wanted lots of parts to draw on.

Fundamental 5

DON'T STUDY TOO MUCH BEFORE YOU TRY IT

Dick showed me what creativity is all about. Oh sure, I read about it, heard about it, all that. But Dick Farmer was genuinely creative. His books show it, his academic career exemplifies it, but his auto repair strategy explains it.

I, a child of the enlightenment, had faith in reason and analysis. Dick sought the fundamental principles. For Dick a motor vehicle represented a class of creation, a species whose members shared generally similar characteristics. Although possessed with an encyclopedic knowledge of automobiles, their parts and heritages, Dick approached a new repair problem with all the gusto of a painter approaching an empty canvas.

"John," he'd say, "it won't start."

Drawing on my formal schooling, I'd say *"Dick, have you checked the spark, is the battery good, what kind of noise does it make?"* and following the principles of diagrammed automotive diagnostics, I'd try to help Dick find the problem.

But before I could get very far he'd say, *"I thought it was the distributor so I put one in from a 1972 AMC I've got at the **GARAGE**."*

"What's the car you're working on?" I'd ask. "It's a '65 Chevy but the distributor fit so I thought I'd try it. Of course the wires weren't right so I borrowed some from a '63 Pontiac or something I had lying around."

As I begin marshalling all the good reasons why that wouldn't work, why the distributor was incompatible, why the '65 Chevy would be ruined by the AMC distributor and the borrowed wires would set the car on fire, Dick's car would start. How did he know it would work? I asked him.

"Oh, I didn't know. Seemed to fit so I tried it."

"What if it ruins the Chevy?"

"Oh, I got the Chevy from a guy down the street who needed 50 bucks, and it didn't run. A great deal, Huh? "

Dick would give the car to Jean, it would run for a week, a month, sometimes as long as a year and then collapse of old age or broken parts.

FARMER'S GARAGE had all the essential elements of the phenomenal Farmer creativity. It was full of the material of creation, the bits and pieces of partly completed and partly dismantled constructions. The **GARAGE**, of course, only dealt with a simple set of challenges focused on vehicles while Dick's creative genius encompassed the world. But his approach to those cars mirrored his approach to all intellectual problems. Out of the chaos of collected and discarded material, of the old and the new, the tools of yesterday and the analysis of today, the half finished and the partly undone, Dick created one running, functioning, useful idea after another.

At **FARMER'S GARAGE** he transformed broken cars into running vehicles, put front ends from one car onto back ends of another, exchanged parts here and there, all with a gleeful disregard of the rules and a remarkably high success rate. In general the cars worked.

In Farmer's academic and intellectual life each creation emerged from the workshop of his mind as a book, an article, a lecture, or a class. The prodigious productivity of Farmeresque automotive creations echoed the phenomenally productive academic constructions.

Fundamental 6

TALK ABOUT IT, WRITE ABOUT IT

One day they had an auction in Mitchell, Indiana. An eccentric car dealer in that community had filled up acres and acres of used cars and apparently never sold a one. Beginning perhaps in the early fifties running until the late sixties, this 40 acre used car lot simply had cars driven into it, parked and left, never to be started again. He wouldn't sell parts, so the cars were whole, damaged by minor vandalism and the ravages of time, magnificent Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Packards, Fords and other wonders of the late forties and fifties, with a scattering of cars from the sixties.

We went to the auction, Dick, John Moe, and I. We bought two cars and two pickup trucks. The rules said we had to pick them up and haul them off within two weeks, so we rented a lowboy trailer, got the ratchet puller from **FARMER'S GARAGE** and went down to Mitchell to claim our goods.

Took two trips. The first one we got Dick's cars. On the second one we got my trucks. Dick was in hog heaven in that yard and with his kit of miscellaneous tools he took bits and pieces from cars here and there along with whatever came with the ones we had bought.

But in the midst of this orgy of automania, Dick conducted a ten hour monologue for John Moe and me on *Business, a Novel Approach*.

"Imagine it," he said, "a textbook that's a novel. A boy- girl thing, with the girl a little bit smarter than the boy. They go through school together learning about business. The book is like a play in a play, and so we'll include the notes they write, the exams they take, the discussions they have, and the love letters they write. We'll put it all in, and the students will be so carried along they'll learn all about business."

And on he went, one flash of an idea after another, one chapter outlined as we drove down, another as we drove back. All delivered in that intense creative and totally absorbed way, monologued, driven, and explosive. Coming back from Mitchell on the last run, the trailer overloaded with junk trucks, we came down a long hill too fast and the trailer began to fishtail, swinging us about. Fighting the wheel we gradually brought the trailer under control. Dick, he didn't slow the monologue a bit, the

story of *Business, a Novel Approach*, continued its creative development without a hesitation. I don't think he ever realized I had almost put us in a ditch.

Fundamental 7

GIVE

As a business professor, Dick tried as hard as he possibly could to be a tough hard-nosed guy. He talked tough, talked about profit, talked about worth and gain, talked about getting rich and making a bundle, talked about competition and power (even wrote a super book about power in universities). But in real life, Dick was a giver, not a taker.

He gave us enthusiasm for the absurd and the flaky. He gave us confidence in ourselves. He gave us the knowledge that the reward is in the joy of doing not in the limelight of fame.

Students loved him, for he gave them to understand that they could do whatever they needed to do. It never occurred to Dick to make others small, to diminish another's worth. In perverse moods I might try to find a way to get Dick to say something harsh about a colleague, even about a colleague whose behavior towards Dick I might find despicable. But he wouldn't do it.

Dick wanted things to work, things to be right, life to work out.

* * *

Now, Dick Farmer is no longer with us. As he died, he struggled to tell us how we could learn from his experience, he offered us the lesson of his death, in dying he gave as he had throughout his life.

But for me, Dick remains in my mind's eye, that generous genius, emerging from the creative chaos of **FARMER'S GARAGE**, carrying part of the A-frame of a mangled Pinto, saying, "*John, I've got this great idea for a book.*"

JohnV. Lombardi
Bloomington, Indiana
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